

HCMC

At first glance the Tan Son Nhat airport of Ho Chi Minh City, looks unchanged from the news photos of it when it captivated the World News Media in the 1970's. I was arriving on a Viet Nam Air flight from Bangkok , Thailand for a 6 day stay, visit their much promoted beaches for a few days and then spend several nights in what was formerly referred to as Saigon. I had never been here before.

Everywhere I looked there was Viet Nam. Viet Nam wants to trade with U.S. ! Viet Nam wants foreign businesses to do business with them, and in their country. "Developing Economy" is how it was being touted. It still is at an ever increasing frequency !

I took a taxi from the airport to Phan Thiet, which is also one of the promotions of the Party (Viet Nam's Government nowadays) 190 km away to the coast. It was about an \$80 usd ride, which would take 2-3 hours to complete. So the hotel with the beachfront bungalow I was going to stay at had informed me in their email from Mui Ne Beach.

There was no alternative excepting the Bus which was definitely out of the question considering I had never been here before. The taxi was much more flexible should things start going in a direction which I did not approve of. Oh, how quickly that can happen without any apparent catalyst in this part of the world. It was going along adequately at the 6km distance when we passed the modern day Vietnam International Container Terminal (VICT) at Tan Thuan , south of HCMC. By the large cubicle statue (Russian ?) that all these countries governed by a Party seem to have, it started to become every vehicle with a minimum of four wheels was totally surrounded by Chinese made knock offs of the 90-110 cc motorbikes that are everpresent in SE Asia. Add a decreasing number of the old fashioned pedal bikes and that is what you have for 180 km going in both directions. This is only a two lane non divided road . It is not a scenic route , but rather the only route. No Planes. No Trains. Everything from pulling oxen to largest trucks and busses use whichever of these two lanes it deems acceptable at the time ! The Rain started shortly after the BIG statue, the taxi driver was afraid of driving in the rain and so it took me about 4 hours to make the trip !

I could not fax any particulars or call the hotel from outside of Viet Nam , let us just say that the web listed contact numbers were inoperable from Thailand. So I had the email reply with a rate quote and that is what I went there on. I am somewhat use to the asian methods and felt that tho it may be a little too risky I would chance it on the hope that I would be able to experience a pleasant surprise when it all worked out well.

The currency is the Dong, approximately 16000.00 to one dollar US ! I always have trouble when \$6.00 equals 100,000.00 of something. Gratuities are as mind boggling for their amounts as they are for their social ramifications at that point to me. I know I should be able to sort it all out, and I feel I do alright with it but it just isn't one of my stronger suits if you understand what I mean ?

The lovely local girls who tend to the cooking an cleaning at the resort really are very attentive to their chores taking into consideration what they have to aid them in their completion. They work 6 days a week, 10 hour days and for the month they get 700,000.00 Dong ! Forty some odd dollars to us ! The Hostess at the hotel, has a little better deal as she receives one million dong for her monthly efforts as day receptionist. Same work week but she is really a receptionist at the main desk and I did not see her do any real physical labor other than wearing a traditional Vietnamese dress. Tho she too was quite helpful .

The local fare was prepared very well, and the kitchen was very clean. I had no problems with it . The power goes out in the daytime a lot. Which really only interrupts your Internet Café usage (120d/minute) of which there are several on the quiet, clean resort areas of the beaches. My bungalow did have air conditioning, several beds, small fridge and sat tv (5 channels...no CNN,BBC,ESPN) . The only local radio stations played a mix of Vietnamese traditional music and what sounded to me like Chinese operas so not much there for an extended listening period. I rented a motorbike and tooled around, which all the ethnics seemed to find somewhat humorous ! I own mine in Thailand to get around the beachfront on and having seen my reflection in a glass window before. I fully accept the fact that I look like some comic character on them. I always wear my helmet on mine, but I didn't see too many helmeted drivers or riders in Viet Nam. And they do not know about headlights on for safety either so they are all quick to point that out to you !



I swam in the pool and I swam in the sea. Ate no fast food, did some catching up on a book I have been wanting to spend some time with. Had a very healthy, restful, stay. Originally I had booked until the day before my flight out . But decided to leave a day earlier and stay in Ho Chi Minh City for one full day and two nites.

The QUIETNESS of the beaches of Phan Thiet at nite is unnatural. It is a product of the Party . Which is just a little more government intervention in the normal daily routine than I really care to experience in a steady dose ! And even if I am, for some unbeknown reason to me, on Best behavior what would I have to tell the boys in the foursome when I returned of my exploits in 'NAM' !

I made another transportation 'mistake' when I left the resort and took the hotel staff recommended bus to Saigon. I wanted to take the minivan for \$6.00 usd advertised up on the wall at the internet café I was using to get my podcasts & email from. It was advertised at the 2-3 hour trip. But I couldn't say NO to the traditionally dressed receptionist who had been so helpful during my stay. That too 5 hours this time in the very dry daylight ! Well it started out in the daylight at 2 pm but I did not arrive in Saigon until 7 pm ! Why did I leave a day earlier than expected she had asked me. As if there was no reason to expect unforeseen events which could significantly alter my reservations. LOL



I stayed in a Party managed hotel (SAIGONTOURIST holding company). It was named Rex Hotel and other than no uninvited guests in your room policy I was more than happy there. They had free internet usage, wonderful free breakfast buffet (tho ending way too early as I feel they all should run up to lunch time), and a terrific Rooftop Garden, partly covered .Situated right next to the old Saigon City Hall & park, yet , around the corner was the historic Opera House ! Tan Son Nhat is 7km.

After my second , and last, horrendous trip from the beach to the city I wanted something to eat. So, when I was approached by a local motorbike taxi operator I gave it a chance and hopped on the back and off we went. He, like the majority of people I met in Viet Nam, were not even born until well after the hostilities between South Viet Nam , who we backed in their civil war for those of you who also are in that age group. Yet , the young people are very well spoken in English and yearn to learn more about the worldwide English and Americans in particular. I really didn't get an opportunity to examine their scholarly curriculum as approved by the Party. Had I asked, I doubt that I would have been granted such a request. Tho , quite frankly, it was hard to see a large uniformed presence of the Party. Now if this is in line with the policy of trying to woo business into the country , having never been there before I can not say.

But someone had certainly put my motorbike (pilot) taxi driver on the wrong course. My day in downtown (uncle) Ho Chi Minh City , like the evening ride before was beginning to be peppered with requests to take me to the 'War Museum', which is a large stone building I was driven by several time with a 1970 ish helicopter, fighter jet, and jeep out beside it. And just when I thought I had the museum unlisted from things I wanted to do in Saigon it was onward and upward to the Embassy. "Do you want to go see the Embassy now ?" , filled in rather nicely in the same location in our conversation, at least that is what the motorbike driver thought.

Ten years ago we reopened our international relations with Viet Nam, the U.S. Embassy is located in Hanoi these days . What my pilot wanted was to take me to the former U.S. Embassy, infamous for the photograph of the poor soul holding on to the struts of the last helicopter to leave Viet Nam. It too, is kept with the large Gold Star on Red background flag of the Party waving atop it. I don't think it has retained its architectural late 60's look for its aesthetic value.

Eventually, I told my driver that I had come to have a good time and I really don't want to go to either of those places. **AND IF HE ASKED ME ONE MORE TIME I WOULD GET ANOTHER DRIVER !**
It was never brought up again.

I was trained to go to Viet Nam in the mid 1960's by the marines. We had backed South Viet Nam's Gov't. at their request . They lost . Now , after Russia couldn't deliver the present government out of its economic plight , most likely due to the end of communism at home. I even heard talk of the U.S.A. renting Cam Ranh Bay ! We are to reinvest and rebuild into their economy. That is where all this media attention is headed, don't kid yourself otherwise.

While you are seeing these things what is Viet Nam doing ? Why, they are putting an exhibition of Vietnamese Agent Orange victims on at the 16th World Festival of Students & Youth in Caracas, Venezuela. The Viet Nam News of 12 August, 2005 read, and I quote: "the Peruvian and Latin American people always thought Viet Nam exemplary as in the fight against imperialism".

Rom, is a ten year old boy , he rents out sheet s of plastic with a string tied on one end in sled like fashion. He works each day with a large group of youngsters, all of school age on the sand dunes right next to the highway down in the beach area I visited. I stopped to drink a coconut and he was part of a group of children who approached me.

I told them I wasn't going to rent the plastic to ride down the dunes. He was curious, the others had left. He wanted to know where I was from so we had a small conversation. I asked him why he wasn't in school ? And he said that he didn't have the money to go to school. Only the rich could go to school. Other than some missionary getting a hold of Ron and the countless children in a similar predicament I think their window of opportunity is disappearing.

In mid July 2005, the Party, effectively ended THE PARTY in Saigon. What was always a notoriously famous red lighted pleasure section of the city was closed down. Everything closes at mid night, no A-GO-GO's Are allowed to be open. If you go to a disco, you must bring your dance partner with you or you will not be allowed entrance ! The boys in my foursome won't like hearing that, travel plans will change over that I am sure.